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Considerations on Conspiracy Theories and Their Application to Migrant Caravans

Consideraciones sobre las teorías conspirativas aplicadas a las caravanas de migrantes

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this article is to analyze the conspiracy theories that emerged to explain migrant caravans en route to the U.S. in October 2018. Through the doctrinal and documentary review of the main approaches to such theories, a political theological definition of conspiracy theory is proposed. Subsequently, the main newspaper sources that include conspiracy explanations about the caravan phenomenon are examined, comparing them with the characteristics studied, and the proposed definition. It is concluded that some states and non-state actors reacted with a political discourse that had conspiracy theories at its core, and that it was their way of making sense and exploiting in the media its swarming features as a novel way of migrating.

Keywords: 1. conspiracy theory, 2. immigration, 3. disinformation, 4. Central America, 5. United States.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las teorías conspirativas que surgieron para explicar las caravanas de migrantes en ruta hacia EE. UU. en octubre de 2018. Mediante la revisión doctrinal y documental de las principales aproximaciones a ese tipo de teorías, se propone una definición teológico política de teoría conspirativa. Posteriormente, se examinan las principales fuentes hemerográficas que recogen explicaciones conspirativas sobre el fenómeno de las caravanas, comparándolas con las características estudiadas y con la definición propuesta. Se concluye que algunos Estados y actores no estatales reaccionaron con un discurso político que tenía las teorías conspirativas como núcleo, y que ese fue su modo de dar sentido y explotar mediáticamente una forma de migrar novedosa por sus rasgos de enjambramiento (*swarming*).

Palabras clave: 1. teoría conspirativa, 2. migración, 3. desinformación, 4. Centroamérica, 5. Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

A series of migrant caravans from Central America attempted to reach the United States in October 2018. The phenomenon generated different reactions, among them numerous conspiracy theories that sought to explain the movement. This article analyzes the nature of such theories and how different actors promoted them, including government officials. We also discuss the novel features of this *en masse* migrant mobilization.

The first section discusses the most relevant conspiracy theory traits according to the most relevant doctrines in the fields of cognitive psychology and political science. In this regard, cognitive biases in the service of a political discourse that seeks to legitimize itself by means of propaganda are key in conspiracy theories, although they are not always perceived as such by those who support or confront them. This section, which is predominantly theoretical, presents contemporary examples and concludes with a proposed definition of conspiracy theory. Broadly speaking, rather than a secularization of divine providence, as has been doctrinally stated, we proposed that conspiracy theories should be understood as an intermingled and secularized set of ideas around fate and predestination. As a key element of the proposal, this approach emphasizes the role of those who enunciate or accept these theories.

The second section presents a hypothesis about the nature of the phenomenon of migrants' caravans at the end of 2018 and the reasons behind the abundance of conspiracy theories to explain them. The theoretical approach chosen is the concept of swarming (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000). This *sui generis* swarming phenomenon was precisely what allowed the agglutination and surprise associated with these caravans. The caravans' "occupation of the border" is similar in its forms and challenges and in its impugnation of space and time to other forms of occupation currently taking place in many cities throughout the world. The activities of these migrant caravans were narrated in stages by the media and social networks. This coverage included not only images of the migrants but also conspiratorial explanations expressed by government officials from the affected countries and non-government actors.

CONSIDERATIONS ON CONSPIRATORY THEORIES

Distinction between conspiracy theory and other terms

Conspiracy theories should not be confused with postulations in which a conspiracy is involved. Even though this term generates rejection, Bale (2007) points out historical examples of real conspiracies that entail, in general terms, the secret meeting of individuals to discuss a plan that will affect reality in some way. In this regard, Lledó (2014) calls them conspiracies "in the neutral sense," characterizing them as specific, intentional, and strategic actions (as a rule, in secret or concealed to some degree in some of their stages) that are always part of a richer and more complex context than the mere attribution of a campaign designed and calculated in detail (2014).

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Along these lines, Latin America has many examples in which politicians meet drug traffickers in order to secure mutual benefits and, in a neutral sense, conspire to carry them out. However, it is different to consider that each of the crimes committed in the conspirators' area of influence depends on the fictitious meeting and that what was agreed to in secret is likely to be carried out. In other words, both conspirators could agree to jointly rule a state, but other factors, institutions, and variables would make it impossible for them to enact such an intention.

These assumptions acknowledge that some of the mechanisms that form these caravans occur in concealment, such as the attempts to organize these massive migratory movements or exploit them in order to achieve a favorable vision of migration and criticize US policy. Such initiatives are part of the confrontation of interests around the complex issue of migration policy.

However, the present article presents a number of factors that, to a greater or lesser degree and depending on their logistic or random nature, prevent the control of migrant caravans (using hierarchical, reticular, or other coordination strategies) in each of its different stages. Thus, given the monolithic cohesion attributed by conspiracy theories to the parties—whether individuals, civil society organizations, or states—the pluralism of this phenomenon (Bale, 2007) is proposed as uncontrollable.

Therefore, the "theory" aspect is highlighted, rather than its "conspiratorial" one. Conspiracy theories are incorrect, especially because of their cognitive style; in many cases, their arguments are fallacious from the beginning.

What has been said up to this point discards the popular term conspiracy theory since it fails to differentiate conspiracies in the neutral sense, that is, habitual and based on facts (albeit hidden from most people), and invented conspiracies. On the other hand, we will refrain from referring to people who believe in conspiracy theories as "conspiranoids" since the colloquial term highlights the paranoid aspect of the phenomenon (the word conspiranoid is made up by "conspiracy" and "paranoia"). This perspective, however, is too restrictive because it emphasizes an assumed psychological condition among those who create or disseminate conspiracy theories and makes it difficult to understand the role of other factors, such as the importance of cognitive biases to support these theories or how they are built based on rumors or recurring lies.

Characteristics of conspiracy theories

As explained above, the three traits that characterize conspiracy theories are: the presence of cognitive biases and rumors, the rhetoric of the alternative, and altered causal relationships among the subjects and facts described by the conspiracy theory.

Dependence on cognitive biases and rumors

Both the word information and the prefix *des* are Latin, but their current use as a single word has its origins in the Russian *dezinformation*, coined in the context of the USSR and the Cold War. The term refers to the dissemination of false information and the generation of confusion or other reactions sought by the disseminator. This technique is based more on quantity than quality (Bertolin, 2017). In other words, mass media allow for the copious and cheap dissemination and messages; therefore, a schematic structure is enough for conspiracy theories to propagate. This section examines the more subtle phenomenon of how conspiracy theories exploit the psychological perceptions of individuals.

Research reviewed by Lledó (2014) from the 1990s—that is, before the rise of social networks—shows that inquiry becomes frozen when conclusions confirm what the investigator desires to prove. On the other hand, if the evidence contravenes the investigator's initial thesis, they will use a biased search method to confirm their prejudice. Social networks promote cognitive biases in a similar way, although massively. All of this has negatively affected the way people perceive and understand information about migrant caravans.

Conspiracy theorists tend to refine and stylize false stories and publish them on blogs and websites; then, they are distributed via social networks, which makes them more of a conveyor than a content generator (Agarwal & Bandeli, 2017).

According to information on Facebook collected by Bertolin (2017), in this social network, disinformation operates according to the following model. In the first place, user data are collected and stored, such as their age or the type of links they visit. Subsequently, more credible disinformation is disseminated to the user who receives it. Simultaneously, the impact is amplified by false accounts that replicate the message.

Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) have studied trust in the message or the sender. To explain the way in which conspiracy theories benefit from trust, these authors use the expression "conspiracy cascade". This metaphor is intended to highlight the connection between conspiratorial argumentation and the reputation of the speaker or disseminator. To explain this mechanism, they point out that the fragility of supposedly demonstrated facts, such as an awkwardly worded or incomplete message, can be supported by objective discourse traits in order to rectify the message and make it appear accurate.

The same authors stress that subjective aspects such as the reputation of the person enunciating the conspiracy theory or the polarization within the group that shares these messages can compensate for the conspiracy theory's lack of a coherent argument. Therefore, the way in which these theories are transmitted should be analyzed as a whole (as a cascade).

These mechanisms show that the cognitive bias helps to reinforce prejudices and thoughts present even before the conspiracy theory, favoring a homogeneous perception and the resulting sense of unanimity that legitimizes the message. Moreover, flooding the media with both true and false information does not mean that the audience will believe anything thrown

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at them: the audience will judge the messages according to whether they serve their purposes or reinforce their values (Yurchak, 2018).

This dialectic between disinformation and cognitive biases can strengthen the so-called "filter bubble," in which the users' ideological perspectives are reinforced as a result of the selective adaptation algorithm behind search engine results (NATO Stratcom Center of Excellence, 2017), as expressed in a glossary published by the NATO Strategic Communications Excellence Center. The result is often an echo chamber effect, that is, the emergence of an ideological environment where ideas and opinions are amplified and reinforced by repetition, reinforcing the individual's solipsism and favoring extremism (Ibidem); this was observed regarding conspiracy theories about migrant caravans.

These biases create cognitive blind spots (Lledó, 2014) that limit the analysis of conspiracy theories' approaches. They also reveal one of the characteristics of these theories: they are essentially monological theories, as postulated by Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012). But such a trait is not only to oppose any dialogue with other individuals, a consideration that presents problems (does not every theory seek to suppress or absorb weaker theories with less explanatory power?). Rather, the monologue of conspiracy theories means something of more significance. Assuming that mass media and social networks are web technologies used for social interaction and to transform [conventional] media monologues into interactive and social dialogues (NATO Stratcom Center of Excellence, 2017), conspiracy theories can be understood as an attempt to shield oneself from the dialogue by means of monologue-based techniques that reject discussion and whose statements entail supposedly definitive proof to settle a controversy.

In addition to the above, conspiracy theories feed on traditional sources, such as rumor. Their adoption is essential to human experience, especially in cases where information is ambiguous or in dangerous situations, when falling for rumors is a temptation (Silverman, 2016); the author analyzed a thousand rumors from the end of World War II and highlighted the predominance of those who announced terrible situations. This effect can be observed in our present day. There are three categories of recurrent rumors in online mass media, two of them have to do with violence: wars (especially in the Middle East) and, as regards the subject matter of the present article, news related to security in the US, among them assassinations occurring in Mexico. The third category concerns economic or technological news related to changes in corporate ownership or the launch of new products (Silverman, 2016).

In addition to the aforementioned rumors about terror, Silverman stresses the relevance of other rumors associated with desires and aspirations, as well as rumors charged with a bias against a social group. Other scholars focused on the issue add a fourth type associated with curiosity or intellectual challenge (Silverman, 2016). These four categories of rumors (terror, desires, stigmatization, and curiosity) are sufficiently encompassing not to be overlooked in this article.

Recurring rumors are inherent to conspiracy theories. Silverman graphically characterizes the most complex type as "bomb rumors". These expressions pose negative connotations toward their target, regardless of their veracity. Therefore, it is not enough to deny them since such denial will never negate the fact that they were enunciated using derogatory terms toward the target. Therefore, repeating a rumor, regardless of context, will detonate the rumor (Silverman, 2016).

In this sense, confronting such rumors from a dialogical perspective, as if those using the bomb rumor as their argument deserved a legitimate part in the dialogue, could have the opposite effect of propagating the theories enunciated by the rumor. The rumor is propagated in a feedback loop that divides the population, as if it was a natural condition, between the detractors and the supporters of the subject matter in conflict (Phillips, 2018a).

Rhetoric of the alternative

Conspiracy theories seek to reveal a supposed hidden truth, and this is shown by the use of an alternative rhetoric. As pointed out by Lledó (2014), conspirators convey the contingent and transitory need to oppose the official version, which is presented as a monumental and fallacious hay doll (2014). Thus, Taïeb (2010) points out that those who believe in dark versions of 9/11 call themselves *truthers*. Supporters of an alternative truth based on conspiracy, truthers base their thesis on their skepticism concerning the terrorist attack.

Another example of a similar manipulation of language can be observed in well-known far-right digital publications. It is enough to surf the Internet and type in the following terms for any user to find that reimmigration is used instead of migrant expulsion; counter-Semitism is used to indicate that the speaker is not anti-Semitic, and white genocide is used as a synonym for increased migration as if demographic change were as abominable as an actual genocide.

Sometimes, very subtle manipulation techniques are used with such a load of ambiguity that it is difficult to distinguish between irony and the normalization of disinformation. A clear example of this ambiguity is the dog whistle technique; in popular language, it refers to the use of a euphemism or even a word that had nothing in common with the connoted word that has been given a meaning only known to those who agreed on such meaning (Magnummanager, 2011).

When the silent whistle technique is successful, the message is spread not only among those who know the code—which can easily deny the actual connotation since the expression is apparently unrelated to the conspiracy theory—, but also among the unsuspecting public who repeat it, ignoring the hidden meaning attributed to it by its promoters.

For example, the use of the expression "OK" in the United States to suggest that one is a supporter of white supremacism is an example of this, so to speak, shrinking irony, which for Phillips (2018a; 2018b) has its roots in the behavior of the first internet "trolls". Thus, in

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2007-2011, the silent whistle technique was extensively used by *4chan*, a virtual bulletin board that allowed any type of message to be disseminated without filters and brought together several subcultures whose common denominator was provocation. However, this cacophony evolved, and its ambivalence emerged, but these techniques were absorbed firstly by the media and then by extreme right-wing groups (Philips, 2018a; 2018b).

Altered causal relationships

This mechanism is aligned with the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (*after that, then as a consequence of this*) fallacy; the explanation has been divided into two sections. Section a) refers to the assumptions made by believers in conspiracy theories about the nature and capabilities of the subjects they blame for the facts that the theory is supposed to explain. Section b) analyzes how such facts are assembled to convince about their explanatory power.

a) Subject

One of the characteristics of the targets of conspiracy theories is the excessive attribution of control with which they are endowed: they achieve an exact production of results that is usually beyond the control of individuals or groups (Lledó, 2014). These agents are presented as influential people or organizations working together in secret to achieve an objective (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012). In general, these individuals represent or refer to—if they remain in the dark—the state (government, military, secret agents) or a minority (such as Jews throughout history or Hispanics in caravans). Such an organizational sieve gives plausibility to facts that, due to the way in which they are presented or connected, are entirely supernatural.

In other words, they allude to the presence of the state or a supposedly organized minority, a state within the state, or even an individual with similar supposed powers (a parallel state), they translate the conspiratorial theorist's outburst into a plausible institutional framework. In this regard, Martin (2019) interviewed a number of Texan extremists and found out that they boast of links, as exaggerated as unprovable, with American officials, and suggest that institutions such as secret agencies or the federal presidency rely on the data gathered by these theorists at the border.

This is the reason why, according to Bale (2007), the individuals who lead conspiracy theories have attributes that make them inhuman, superhuman, or antihuman as a counterpoint to a radical and omnipotent evil correlated with Manichaean and apocalyptic visions of the world. Conspiracy theories can capture these traits by appealing to an arcane knowledge appropriate to disseminate the denounced facts but unintelligible to others, although people who believe in these theories surprisingly does understand; they are abundant in sinister techniques carried of political, social, economic, or any other nature

capable of shepherding individuals and run a clandestine organization that exceeds what was natural before the conspiratorial revelation (Bale, 2007).

A clear example of such powers of omnipotence is synthesized by the forgery known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. This example of black propaganda (that is, attributed to the person to be denigrated) was created in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Published in Russia in 1905, its nucleus is a *Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu* (1864), by Maurice Joly, an allegorical conversation between the two thinkers aimed at criticizing the techniques of French dictatorial power at the time. Joly's text, together with the copying and alteration of other documents, was intended to denigrate the Jews by claiming that they had the power to control all governments, century after century (Ben-Itto, 2004). The role of millionaire and philanthropist George Soros in conspiracy theories concerning migrant caravans will be discussed in the following paragraphs, another example on how a Jewish individual is invested with superhuman powers.

The corollary of the type of subjects chosen as the protagonists of conspiracy theories is that they seek to explain general facts and elevated themes (Taïeb, 2010), which result in ambiguous and unclear realities (Lledó, 2014). In other words, explanations are not focused on the prosaic, but on circumstances that, precisely because of their complexity, make the conspiratorial approach a blurred matter. This may be due to a perceived need for a correlation between a serious or unforeseen event and an equally important cause to veil the tension produced by the subjective perception of inconsistencies (Lledó, 2014), a tension that does not occur in everyday life.

b) Facts

After having analyzed the general traits of those who are usually found in the center of such theories, we will now study how the theories present the facts: their argumentative framework. For that purpose, we follow Lledó's (2014) analysis on the conspiracy theories around the 11-M (several jihadist attacks in Madrid, Spain, in 2004, which killed 193 people) because the author summarizes the state of affairs and some of his arguments can be applied to conspiracy theories about caravans.

Every conspiracy theory uses both objective and subjective "techniques of irrefutability". The former consists in assertions that are diffuse or contradictory, whereas the latter are constructed by changing the assertion or the logical consequences associated with it, and the believer adapts to the arguments put forward, sometimes even practically denying what they previously supported (Lledó, 2014).

Among the objective techniques, Lledó (2014) describes: narrating fantastic or extravagant assertions and reasonings; presenting erroneous data as accurate despite an evident lack of validity; citing irrelevant or straightforward data; making unproven attributions of intention, and resorting on fuzzy information sources. These techniques also involve assertions that seem to be in conflict with one another, such as theoretical hyper-

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abstraction or, on the contrary, unconnected facts presented without theories to support or connect them (Lledó, 2014). Hyperabstraction would be an escape upward; if the image is allowed, an unprovable "theoretical tornado," while the presentation of isolated facts serves as a "dust devil," no more coherent than the conspiratorial background in the mind of the believer.

The use of subjective techniques produces the effect of a "moving target," understood as the changes made by the supporter of the conspiracy theory while enunciating its discourse. In some examples, the conspiracist retreats to a weaker assertion, but remains within the same conspiratorial paradigm; in others, a hypothetical possibility is enough demonstration that something actually occurred (Lledó, 2014).

In this regard, there are consequences for causal relationships. By disseminating multiple versions of events, some of them contradictory, the conspiracist can present a hazy account of events and drown their speaker in conjecture (Conspiracy Watch, 2018). As can be observed in the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber, the most systematic paranoid of the twentieth century (except, perhaps, for writer Philip K. Dick), nothing is as it seems, as clearly described by Roberto Calasso (2008).

In this line of argument, reality unfolds indefinitely as a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy. This expression, collected by Phillips (2018b) and attributed to a US editor, alludes to the dangers of allowing supporters of conspiracy theories to debate in mass media or other forums on par with other subjects. If this gap between the systematized lies of conspiracy theories and actual facts is normalized, distinguishing true from false becomes impossible (hence the allusion to the photocopy of a photocopy).

In this context, any event is encrypted (Taïeb, 2010) and ends up acting as proof of the conspiracy theory. The image of the "umbrella man" is an example of this unfolding reality. According to Bale (2007), many conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy refer to an individual who, at a given moment, opens an umbrella. For the profane, this is a banal circumstance, but for the supporters of the conspiracy theory about the *hidden truth* of the assassination, it becomes proof, an act that is part of an inflationary series of key pieces of information, adduced at one time or another as *smoking guns* (Lledó, 2014), or in the words of Judge Ben-Itto (2004), manufactured emblems.

As a conclusion to points a) and b), we would like to highlight the *overlapping of subject and facts within the framework of conspiracy theory*. Following Wood, Douglas, and Sutton (2012), both the subject to whom the theory is ascribed and the assembly of facts in the plot are interwoven in a framework that admits conflicting ideas. In other words, the foundation of all these theories is an idea of power, and that framework, common to different theories, allows for the apparent aporia where individuals can believe one thing and its opposite at the same time. They are a sort of "evocative appendages," that is, the tendency to associate each new fact with the conspiracy theory (Lledó, 2014), which prevents conspiracy theories from

isolation. These "appendices" join the theories together and support the framework where they exist.

Proposed definition of conspiracy theory

The resignification frenzy described in the previous paragraphs leads to subjectivism as the backbone of the conspiracy monologue. A conspiracy theory can be defined as a monological reasoning that, to assert empty promises of causality, exploits cognitive biases and rumors in an argumentative body of scientific ideas (in a broad sense, since terms from the social and philosophical sciences are often used freely) to alter the causal relationships of the subjects and facts in the theory by virtue of the enlightened, predestined gift of the enunciator or the believer.

A few words must be said about this "predestined" aspect of the enunciator or of those who adhere to them before moving on to analyze the subject matter in relation to migrant caravans. Taïeb (2010) rightly argues that conspiracy theories present the features of a secularized divine providence. These theories ascribe an absolute primacy to intentionality, although they have an essential difference with theology, which constructs the idea of providence based on divine will, whereas conspiracy theories attempt to convince on the basis of secularized, apparently scientific discourse (Taïeb, 2010).

This section accepts this assumption, but we introduce a twist. Conspiracy theories secularize a mixture of fate and predestination rather than providence, but they do it not by way of analogy—as Taïeb (2010) states in the case of providence—, but by changing a substantial trait. The twist concerns the role of those who enunciate and believe the theories. In order to understand this, the theological debate on divine providence, in which Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600) attempts to combine the term with the concept of free will, is useful, despite the understandable vulgarization with which the matter is dealt with, that is, the freedom of the individual within the limits of providence.

For this Jesuit theologian, divine providence is the reason or conception of an order of things in relation to their ends that dwells in the divine mind (Molina, 2007), although God can display that order by itself or by secondary causes, as dependent on the first cause (divine providence). It is in this execution that free will comes to be (Molina, 2007); to solve (avoid) the problem of freedom, it is established that providence is order toward an end, although the outcome is not included. Those who are free can choose between wanting something or not (Molina, 2007). In other words, when someone refuses to do good, it is not that he or she is placing themselves at another level of providence, but that providence establishes order and individual freedom does the rest since (because of the difference between the conditional will and the absolute will of God) men are free to achieve happiness, but also to sin (Molina, 2007).

These considerations seem to reinforce the analogy presented by Taïeb (2010). Nevertheless, a closer look reveals that the conceptualization of divine providence is

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associated with individual freedom, something that conspiracy theories demean and, ultimately, deny. For that reason, the structure of these theories is determined by the idea of fate, which Molina (2007) criticizes for its fatalistic goal. It can even be argued that people who use these theories to explain facts are a modern category of the "predestined" or special individuals subjected not only to providence but to the absolute path of salvation, utterly lacking freedom; therefore, predestination is limited to those who achieve glory (Molina, 2007). Supporters of conspiracy theories secularize the traits of fatalism and predestination by investing themselves with the gift of seeing conspiracies that are almost omnipotent, conspiracies that only they can recognize. This places them at a level of power similar to that attributed to the perpetrators of conspiratorial events.

CONSPIRATIVE THEORIES AROUND MIGRANT CARAVANS

This section uses the theoretical considerations presented above to explain the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in the context of migrant caravans. The study covers the period from October 12, when the first migrant caravan departed from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to November 16, 2018, when the first groups arrived in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. We will also refer to a migration movement earlier that year, since it presented similar characteristics.

As a divisive issue, migration is part of a larger discourse

The exploitation of cognitive biases and rumors to disinform and strengthen conspiracy theories was based on a univocal interpretation of the migrant as a threat from the southern border. In this way, dynamics from the United States related to national migration policy or electoral disputes fit into a larger issue that establishes an irreducible division between nationals and foreigners, or as Yurchak (2018) points out, the stereotypes of the "true patriot" as opposed to the "foreign agent".

In Europe, extremist websites connect these parameters with broader conspiracy theories. Thus, the October caravans were linked with possible migratory waves, allegedly devised in the Balkans, heading mainly to Hungary and from there to the rest of the western part of the continent (Hungary Journal, 2018). This framework is key to spreading false news about migration and turning opposition to this phenomenon into a defining part of a nativist ideology (Conspiracy Watch, 2018).

To further reinforce a discourse to organize biases and rumors at the service of the political agenda, sources of matching ideology disseminated false information on the Marrakech Pact on migration after the peak of the Central American caravan crisis (December 10-11, 2018); this pact is officially known as the "Global Pact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration". This intergovernmental conference, which provides open guidelines for governments to address the phenomenon of migration, was pointed out as the first stone of a rambling

(because of its alleged material impossibility) "world law" stating that national powers should drop their migration policies and accept migrants massively (Conspiracy Watch, 2018).

In this theoretical crossroads, such rhetoric is associated with an even broader idea associated with the perception of a "conquest" of western countries by migrants (in Europe, Muslims; in the United States, Hispanics). This perception is associated with the term "white genocide" as part of a supposed "Great Replacement" of native populations by migrants. However, these hyperbolic claims are as vacuous as they are deadly, and they have resulted in political violence on both sides of the Atlantic (Pérez Caballero, 2014a; Conspiracy Watch, 2018).

In this regard, the American right-wing websites characterized the Easter week caravans as a coordinated and organized infiltration effort (Hatewatch Staff, 2018). At least since October 16, and explicitly on the 22nd and 23rd of that month, extremist media described these caravans as associated with infiltration (Shanmugasundaram, 2018). With the upcoming elections on November 6 in the United States Senate, the migrant convoy was used as a "volatile flashpoint" in the immigration debate; the purpose was to galvanize and denigrate Democrats in the elections (Semple & Jordon, 2018). Trends already seen at least since 2016 were reedited in the American elections and then in 2018, in Italy and in Brazil. These cases show how elections have begun to emerge in a context of polarization, as well as new methods and media shared by individuals, groups, or states that assume conspiracy theories to a greater or lesser extent (Applebaum, 2019).

The problem with the official version

In the context of these migrant caravans, official institutions were part of or disseminators of conspiracy theories, a twist to how these theories usually emerge, as a rejection of the official version. In April 2018, the president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, began to attack Central American migrants mainly on Twitter, repeating his attacks in October, when mass caravan movements began (Semple, 2018; Hatewatch Staff, 2018). The April precedents of the October caravans represented a similar set of fears associated with the masses of migrant groups that saw them as criminals, disease vectors, or agents of terror (Peters 2018).

Taking advantage of the cryptic tone and double sense granted by short phrases or of the dragging effect of *hashtags* in the aforementioned social network (Bertolin & Sedova, 2017), the official account of the US president engaged in an absurd micromanagement of the event, narrating the stages of each journey and warning of ominous dangers. In the weeks before the elections, Trump assumed a partisan discourse on caravans, as shown by his tweets for one month, from October 16 to November 16, 2018 (Martin, 2019). In fact, Lind (2018) mocks Trump, calling him "TV viewer in chief," in a play on words with *Commander in*

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Chief, as an example of "B-roll" edition in reference to images that overlap the discourse of a voice-over.

This partisanship was assumed not only by the presidency, but also by an official security institution such as the United States Department of Homeland Security (2018). This department also produced biased information. In an official document that sought to distinguish "myth" from "fact" about caravans, this public institution presented unconfirmed claims as the official version, without specifying any sources; it alluded to infiltrations by organized crime, without specifying which organization or organizations were involved; it repeatedly stigmatized the caravan, linking it with individuals who could be seen as terrorists by the American imaginary, and it treated migrants as an undifferentiated mass. The document is plenty in rhetorical clichés, such as certain untraceable "field reports from our foreign colleagues".

But if we carefully observe the role of these "foreign colleagues," in other words, the presidents of the countries through which the caravan passed, we can observe a hostile discourse similar to that of the American counterpart, a result of ideological alignment, at least in the case of the Guatemalan and Honduran presidents. For instance, Guatemalan president Jimmy Morales repeated the recurring rumor of members of a terrorist organization crossing the US-Mexico border (Silverman, 2016), and the claim was highlighted in a conference of Central American presidents with US representatives on the day when the migratory movement began (Tourliere 2018). On the other hand, in Honduras, the government repeatedly blamed "political sectors," with no data other than those available at the moment (La Prensa, 2018). The alignment of these three presidents in regard to conspiratory discourse guaranteed media coverage.

False causality (I): George Soros

George Soros is a recurring figure, analogous to the aforementioned "umbrella man", in conspiratory theories around migrant caravans; according to those who postulate these theories, he gives meaning to seemingly scattered facts. Soros was invested with the ability to promote massive migratory movements either because of his charismatic presence or because of his influence with civil society organizations, as reported by American and European media (Heath, Wynn, & Guynn, 2018; Eurotopics, 2018).

Such a weight is almost a new account of the Rothschild myth, in reference to the Jewish millionaire who symbolized control over capitalism and the world (Conspiracy Watch, 2018). An older example is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, created by the Tzar's *agents provocateurs* against the backdrop of intellectual anti-Semitism in Europe during the late nineteenth century, which is still obscenely presented as proof, hint, or revelation (Ben-Itto, 2004).

The different speculations around Soros are assembled for the believer in the form of conspiracy theories concerning the caravans—after all, he is a Jew, a millionaire, a financial

speculator, a financier, and a promoter of civil society organizations. These traits are innocuous in themselves, but the conspiratorial discourse systematizes and rearranges them.

A quarter of a century before the studied migratory events, Thomson and Marray (1993) enumerated facts that would gradually contribute to this mythical image, in the worst sense, of Soros. Apparently, the financier boasted about his ability to condition markets, at least successfully enough to become a millionaire in the 1990s.

Soros's enrichment methods gave rise to the term "Soros Express", an expression that we will further analyze. For Thomson & Marray (1993), "Soros Express" is used in a non-degrading way simply to describe how Soros managed to foresee market movements, which resulted in a follow-up of these economic institutions, which tend to elevate financial gurus cyclically. But this "Soros Express" expression came to mean something different decades later, although it was presented as original. In the context of migrant caravans, the expression was associated with the alleged financing of the caravans by Soros.

Albright (2018) studied where and when this rumor about Soros began. The author reports on precedents from November 2016 and throughout 2017, but establishes March 30, 2018, as the date when Soros was definitely linked to the caravans, with the usual amplification by blogs, bots, and trolls over the following months (Heath, Wynn, & Guynn, 2018).

Regarding the autumn caravans, Phelps (2018) explains that since October 13, the day after the first caravan left, a related tweet about Soros was detected. Heath, Wynn, and Guynn (2018) found October 14 to be the first date in which Soros was mentioned in social networks in connection with conspiracy theories around the caravans by expressions such as "white genocide" or "Jewish intromission" and characterizations of the migrants as "invaders".

Some five days later, thousands of Twitter accounts with millions of followers clearly alluded to the philanthropist, most of them associated with conspiracy theories about caravans (Heath, Wynn, & Guynn, 2018). Ten days after the beginning of the events, different theories in which Soros played a more or less important role had emerged.

On October 22, an improvised explosive device detonated outside his home in New York, and similar acts were perpetrated against politicians critical of Trump (Heath, Wynn, & Guynn, 2018). In connection with the killing of 11 people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by an extreme right-wing individual who believed in conspiracy theories, there is at least one context in which caravans can be related to a pre-existing campaign of disinformation to promote violence.

Although the caravans pertain to the whole continent, the connection with the Soros and the polarization generated by migratory issues in Europe made it possible for these conspiracy theories to be amplified by organizations tied to the Russian regime. This was done, for example, by *Sputnik*, a news agency created in 2014, in line with Russia's strategic turn after the Georgian War of 2008, whereby the government implemented an asymmetric war policy using media and biased information, disinformation, and controlled journalistic

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notes to create confusion (De Pedro & Iriarte, 2017). An example of how the media covered the caravans is the case of a journalist who was expelled from the United States due to her spying for Russia years ago, a typical case of the now-forgotten *agent provocateur*. With this case, the reader will become familiar with the concrete functioning of these theories.

Peláez (2018) starts from the organizational levels of the caravans involving Soros according to the fallacies observed in causal relationships. This author denies any possibility of bringing individuals together, except for a planning hierarchy and the "evocative appendices" that gather events scattered for those who do not believe in the conspiracy theory. Peláez may be thanked, perhaps, for giving the text a patina of respectability and mentioning its sources. Thus, Peláez (2018) refers to a series of media linking Soros to the "Soros Express" coalition of invading refugees. Even by their names, their sources are suspect:

- In the first place, the author refers to a blog called *Laicos de Honduras*, which actually refers to a religious fundamentalist website called *Infovaticana*, which in turn cites notes (without referencing the origin of such sources) by *Laicosdehonduras* (2018). What they attribute to Soros is the planning and financing of caravans, which they call "Soros Express". They also refer to Soros's advocacy for governments to approve measures such as the legalization of marijuana and abortion or the promotion of LGBT rights, as if the approval of these measures in countries where they are in force, or where their implementation is discussed, were not due to different causes. Additionally, Soros would also promote the infiltration into the Catholic Church of individuals associated with civil society organizations as part of an alleged globalist agenda seeking a new world order.

- Secondly, with regard to the Honduran newspaper *La Tribuna,* no news was found concerning the role of Soros in the organization of caravans. If such news existed, they have already been eliminated.

- Thirdly, *Forosperu.net* is also referenced, an extravagant source given the lack of relationship between this Andean country and the events (perhaps, since Peláez is Peruvian, she considered it appropriate to bring it up). In any case, the only entry in this regard is from May 2018, in the section "*Actualidad Mundial*" (Haverluck, 2018). It should be remembered that the association between Soros and the Central American caravans began at the end of March of that year. The entry was cut and pasted from a news item dated May 1, 2018, from a portal called *OneNewsNow.com*. The link to the note is broken, and it has not been stored by data collection sites, such as *Wayback Machine*. It is possible to find out that the website belongs to a company founded in 2007; the company has a background in the nineties as a Christian fundamentalist organization that presented daily news from a biblical perspective (OneNewsNow.com, 2017).

False causality (II): Human rights activists

This is a slightly more refined variant than the previous one. Rather than alluding to the fact that Soros fostered these migratory movements, it considers that there is a kind of synergy, sometimes hierarchical, sometimes reticular, between different human rights activists who are strong enough to mobilize thousands of migrants from Honduras to the United States.

It is unquestionable that the movements of caravans represent a modus operandi still to be conceptualized. But pointing out that this is a novel doctrinal component is much more moderate than positing nodes capable of moving people across borders almost at will, as preliminary investigations have shown (Correa-Cabrera, 2019; Correa-Cabrera & Gómez - Schempp, 2019). It is much to suppose something like a "false flag operation" to radicalize the issue of migration or even to benefit, after an excessively thin chain of causality, a "military-industrial border complex," an allusion developed by Dear (2013), which portraits an hyper-abstraction of the Eisenhower military-industrial complex.

Rather, the civil society organizations (NGOs) referred to in these studies only demonstrate that there are actors with an ideological background sufficiently interrelated and solid enough to encourage migration and use it politically. But nothing more, much less if we add the Jewish conspiratorial element and equidistance between plausible theories and conspiratorial theories about caravans is established (Solalinde & Correa-Cabrera, 2019), connecting them with dubious sources, such as Peláez (2018), who presented them as intentional ways to create chaos before the inauguration of the new Mexican president.

Therefore, we propose to organize the reflection on caravans according to the doctrine of swarming (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000), defined militarily as the systematic pulsation of force and/or fire by scattered, interconnected units to beat the adversary from all directions simultaneously (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000). Transposing this doctrine, already applied by the authors to actions by NGOs (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2003), caravans were configured as a swarm, understood as a way to reach a space (the border) by means of groups, with individuals walking in blocks to favor personal protection through group visibility.

This possibility of relating small units, families, and groups of migrants to which other groups and individuals can be added as they advance, and the capacity to connect them, represents a non-linear space that technologically reunites spatially separated groups (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000).This type of movement fits with the idea of "taking the border" as a goal or a brand, as a gathering place for migrants to achieve the sum of "hypervisibility" (Lind, 2018). This swarming could have resulted in an amorphous but deliberately structured silhouette, as has been the case with the massive takeover of sites in many world capitals, generating a "geopolitics of conspiracies" (Pérez Caballero, 2014b). Configured, at least potentially, as an attack from all directions, this operation allows for a sort of autonomy without leading nodes (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2000).

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Thus, the caravans' swarming character is as innovative as it is iconic. An emotional but ambiguous discursive support can be observed in the idea of America as *ecumenopolis*, alluding to a possible continental city without borders, which in turn provides a unitary discourse to migrant groups (Olmstead, 2018). The date on which the first caravan began its March, October 12, could have a stoic or Catholic origin (*Día de la Raza* in Honduras, Columbus Day in the United States; the date is acknowledged in every American country). In this symbolic shade, along the lines of the "we are all Americans by birth" slogan, or the use of religious impulses such as the tradition of migrant "viacrucis" (El Universal, 2018; Castillo Stgo, 2018), it provided emotional shielding for the different iconic stages.

However, it should be borne in mind that the swarming of caravans was partial, and it could almost be said that it could not have been otherwise, since such organization is inherently hazardous, and even the very nature of swarming perseveres more in its 'nodeless' character than in its compactness. Beyond political motives—as the president of that country complained and even alluded to Venezuela as a shadow organizer—, the promotion of the caravan in Honduras seems to have been the result of previous catalysis. From that perspective, the role of a Honduran human rights leader whose Facebook account was cloned (Besinger & Zabludovsky, 2018; Carrasco, 2018; Galván, 2018), calls for the question of who was behind the hacking, but it does not mean that those who carried it out were the organizers of this movement, which goes beyond any civil society organization.

These arguments suggest discarding interpretations in which, if the expression is allowed, we *act as a detective absorbed in inquiring who organized the caravans*. Personalist frameworks are faced with an inherently uncontrollable phenomenon, since neither individuals, nor even networks or organizations, can generate something that is not within their power to be generated by anyone, such as controlling such a massive movement. Not even transnational organizations claim to devise and maintain a movement of thousands of people in different states.

Similarly, the described mode of movement (groups of individuals who advocated traveling together) favored the aggregation of any other individual, although the predominant profile was that of Central Americans (Stevenson, 2018). But that does not mean that they all had the same objectives. On the contrary, some decisions assumed that, for example, the caravans would break apart in Veracruz at the beginning of November (Hernández, 2018; Pradilla, 2018). A plausible risk for a floating population, sometimes in the thousands, with exceptional increases in short periods, and the general lack of knowledge about the exact number of walkers, precisely because of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of swarming. The supposedly strong logistics of civil society leaders and organizations dissipated. While some migrants accepted help from official Mexican institutions (such as transportation or lodging), others, predominantly young people without a family, ventured on their own (Pradilla, 2018).

This phenomenon was correlated with a response from the authorities in the different countries involved. Central American migration institutions sometimes allowed the masses of migrants to cross, as well as the Mexican authorities; in other cases, Mexican security forces deployed on the southern border selectively repressed the migrants (Lind, 2018; Ola, 2018; However, 2018; The Associated Press, 2018). In turn, as the caravans advanced, the political authorities of that country offered assistance to the travelers.

Perhaps the only unitary response, at least discursively, was that of the three presidents (Guatemala, Honduras, and the United States) and their ideological acolytes, who expressed their position in accordance with the aforementioned conspiracy core and strictly in terms of national security.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has reflected on conspiracy theories and proposed a definition of them. We have conceptualized them as a monological reasoning mode based mainly on cognitive biases, lies, and rumors that appears to be led by scientific reasoning, in the broadest sense. Those who hold them acquire traits that, in a secularized theological sense, correspond to the predestined. *Predestined* to be the only one who knows a hidden truth that is supposedly revealed.

From this perspective, we analyzed large migrations taking place in October 2018 from Central America to the United States. We identified the presence of the aforementioned cognitive biases and rumors in the framework of migration as part of a nativist political discourse; the role of the authorities (at least in the United States, Guatemala, and Honduras) as promoters of conspiracy theories; the re-edition of old characters, such as the "Jew," and the involvement of recent actors, such as human rights activists.

The doctrine of swarming is proposed to explain the novelty of this migratory phenomenon. This mass migration action was incomplete, and therefore it is difficult to state what it could have been. However, it did generate social uncertainty, which was responded to by a mediatic swarming of conspiracy theories interwoven with political discourse.

In conclusion, the plurality with which these phenomena should be understood remains to be emphasized. Thousands of individuals were involved in the analyzed topic, as well as five national governments (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States) and different local administrations. The distance from San Pedro Sula to Tijuana is 4 980 km, an extension almost equivalent to that from Cloyes-sur-le-Loir, from where the evocative Crusade of the Children of the XIII century began, to Jerusalem, the longed-for destination. The October caravans are close to mass movements such as that medieval crusade, as Bellinghausen has already described (2014), via Marcel Schwob, in the case of Honduras. In this regard, the reader can be referred to Andrzejewski's (1996) version to attest to the massive weight that personal twists—become massive misunderstandings—had during the caravans. Some October caravans came utterly and confusedly to an end as in the Polish author's novel (Andrzejewski, 1996) is described: "And they walked all night".

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